

The burden of the Gospels

by [Wendell Berry](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

Anybody half awake these days will be aware that there are many Christians who are exceedingly confident in their understanding of the Gospels, and who are exceedingly self-confident in their understanding of themselves in their faith. They appear to know precisely the purposes of God, and they appear to be perfectly assured that they are now doing, and in every circumstance will continue to do, precisely God's will as it applies specifically to themselves. They are confident, moreover, that God hates people whose faith differs from their own, and they are happy to concur in that hatred.

Having been invited to speak to a convocation of Christian seminarians, I at first felt that I should say nothing until I confessed that I do not have any such confidence. And then I understood that this would have to be my subject. I would have to speak of the meaning, as I understand it, of my lack of confidence, which I think is not at all the same as a lack of faith.

It is a fact that I have spent my life, for the most part willingly, under the influence of the Bible, particularly the Gospels, and of the Christian tradition in literature and the other arts. As a child, sometimes unwillingly, I learned many of the Bible's stories and teachings, and was affected more than I knew by the language of the King James Version, which is the translation I still prefer. For most of my adult life I have been an urgently interested and frequently uneasy reader of the Bible, particularly of the Gospels. At the same time I have tried to be a worthy reader of Dante, Milton, Herbert, Blake, Eliot and other poets of the Christian tradition. As a result of this reading and of my experience, I am by principle and often spontaneously, as if by nature, a man of faith. But my reading of the Gospels, comforting and clarifying and instructive as they frequently are, deeply moving or exhilarating as they frequently are, has caused me to understand them also as a burden, sometimes raising the hardest of personal questions, sometimes bewildering, sometimes contradictory, sometimes apparently outrageous in their demands. This is the confession of an unconfident reader.

I will begin by dealing with the embarrassing questions that the Gospels impose, I imagine, upon any serious reader. There are two of these, and the first is this: If you had been living in Jesus' time and had heard him teaching, would you have been one of his followers?

To be an honest taker of this test, I think you have to try to forget that you have read the Gospels and that Jesus has been a "big name" for 2,000 years. You have to imagine instead that you are walking past the local courthouse and you come upon a crowd listening to a man named Joe Green or Green Joe, depending on judgments whispered among the listeners on the fringe. You too stop to listen, and you soon realize that Joe Green is saying something utterly scandalous, utterly unexpected from the premises of modern society. He is saying: "Don't resist evil. If somebody slaps your right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too. Love your enemies. When people curse you, you must bless them. When people hate you, you must treat them kindly. When people mistrust you, you must pray for them. This is the way you must act if you want to be children of God." Well, you know how happily *that* would be received, not only in the White House and the Capitol, but among most of your neighbors. And then suppose this Joe Green looks at you over the heads of the crowd, calls you by name and says, "I want to come to dinner at your house."

I suppose that you, like me, hope very much that you would say, "Come ahead." But I suppose also that you, like me, had better not be too sure. You will remember that in Jesus' lifetime even his most intimate friends could hardly be described as overconfident.

The second question is this—it comes right after the verse in which Jesus says, "If you love me, keep my commandments." Can you be sure that you would keep his commandments if it became excruciatingly painful to do so? And here I need to tell another story, this time one that actually happened.

In 1569 in Holland, a Mennonite named Dirk Willems, under capital sentence as a heretic, was fleeing from arrest, pursued by a "thief-catcher." As they ran across a frozen body of water, the thief-catcher broke through the ice. Without help, he would have drowned. What did Dirk Willems do then?

Was the thief-catcher an enemy merely to be hated, or was he a neighbor to be loved as one loves oneself? Was he an enemy whom one must love in order to be a child of God? Was he "one of the least of these my brethren"?

What Dirk Willems did was turn back, put out his hands to his pursuer and save his life. The thief-catcher, who then of course wanted to let his rescuer go, was forced to arrest him. Dirk Willems was brought to trial, sentenced and burned to death by a “lingering fire.”

I, and I suppose you, would like to be a child of God even at the cost of so much pain. But would we, in similar circumstances, turn back to offer the charity of Christ to an enemy? Again, I don’t think we ought to be too sure. We should remember that “Christian” generals and heads of state have routinely thanked God for the deaths of their enemies, and that the persecutors of 1569 undoubtedly thanked God for the capture and death of the “heretic” Dirk Willems.

Those are peculiar questions. I don’t think we can escape them, if we are honest. And if we are honest, I don’t think we can answer them. We humans, as we well know, have repeatedly been surprised by what we will or won’t do under pressure. A person may come to be, as many have been, heroically faithful in great adversity, but as long as that person is alive we can only say that he or she did well but remains under the requirement to *do* well. As long as we are alive, there is always a next time, and so the questions remain. These are questions we must live with, regarding them as unanswerable and yet profoundly influential.

The other burdening problems of the Gospels that I want to talk about are like those questions in that they are not solvable but can only be lived with as a sort of continuing education. These problems, however, are not so personal or dramatic but are merely issues of reading and making sense.

As a reader, I am unavoidably a writer. Many years of trying to write what I have perceived to be true have taught me that there are limits to what a human mind can know, and limits to what a human language can say. One may believe, as I do, in inspiration, but one must believe knowing that even the most inspired are limited in what they can tell of what they know. We humans write and read, teach and learn, at the inevitable cost of falling short. The language that reveals also obscures. And these qualifications that bear on any writing must bear of course on the Gospels.

I need to say also that, as a reader, I am first of all a literalist, as I think every reader should be. This does not mean that I don’t appreciate Jesus’ occasional irony or sarcasm (“They have their reward”), or that I am against interpretation, or that I don’t believe in “higher levels of meaning.” It certainly does not mean that I think

every word of the Bible is equally true, or that *literalist* is a synonym for *fundamentalist*. I mean simply that I expect any writing to make literal sense before making sense of any other kind. Interpretation should not contradict or otherwise violate the literal meaning. To read the Gospels as a literalist is, to me, the way to take them as seriously as possible.

But to take the Gospels seriously, to assume that they say what they mean and mean what they say, is the beginning of troubles. Those would-be literalists who yet argue that the Bible is unerring and unquestionable have not dealt with its contradictions, which of course it does contain, and the Gospels are not exempt. Some of Jesus' instructions are burdensome not because they involve contradiction, but merely because they are so demanding. The proposition that love, forgiveness and peaceableness are the only neighborly relationships that are acceptable to God is difficult for us weak and violent humans, but it is plain enough for any literalist. We must either accept it as an absolute or absolutely reject it. The same for the proposition that we are not permitted to choose our neighbors ahead of time or to limit neighborhood, as is plain from the parable of the Samaritan. The same for the requirement that we must be perfect, like God, which seems as outrageous as the Buddhist vow to "save all sentient beings," and perhaps is meant to measure and instruct us in the same way. It is, to say the least, unambiguous.

But what, for example, are we to make of Luke 14:26: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." This contradicts not only the fifth commandment but Jesus' own instruction to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." It contradicts his obedience to his mother at the marriage in Cana of Galilee. It contradicts the concern he shows for the relatives of his friends and followers. But the word in the King James Version is "hate." If you go to the New English Bible or the New Revised Standard Version, looking for relief, the word still is "hate." This clearly is the sort of thing that leads to "biblical exegesis."

My own temptation is to become a literary critic, wag my head learnedly and say, "Well, this obviously is a bit of hyperbole—the sort of exaggeration a teacher would use to shock his students awake." Maybe so, but it is not obviously so, and it comes perilously close to "He didn't really mean it"—always a risky assumption when reading, and especially dangerous when reading the Gospels. Another possibility, and I think a better one, is to accept our failure to understand, not as a misstatement or a textual flaw or as a problem to be solved, but as a question to live

with and a burden to be borne.

We may say with some reason that such apparent difficulties might be resolved if we knew more, a further difficulty being that we *don't* know more. The Gospels, like all other written works, impose on their readers the burden of their incompleteness. However partial we may be to the doctrine of the true account or "realism," we must concede at last that reality is inconceivably great and any representation of it necessarily incomplete.

St. John at the end of his Gospel, remembering perhaps the third verse of his first chapter, makes a charming acknowledgment of this necessary incompleteness: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written." Our darkness, then, is not going to be completely lighted. Our ignorance finally is irremediable. We humans are never going to know everything, even assuming we have the capacity, because for reasons of the most insistent practicality we can't be told everything. We need to remember here Jesus' repeated admonitions to his disciples: You don't know; you don't understand; you've got it wrong.

The Gospels, then, stand at the opening of a mystery in which our lives are deeply, dangerously and inescapably involved. This is a mystery that the Gospels can only partially reveal, for it could be fully revealed only by more books than the world could contain. It is a mystery that we are condemned but also are highly privileged to live our way into, trusting properly that to our little knowledge greater knowledge may be revealed. It is this privilege that should make us wary of any attempt to reduce faith to a rigmarole of judgments and explanations, or to any sort of familiar talk about God. Reductive religion is just as objectionable as reductive science, and for the same reason: Reality is large, and our minds are small.

And so the issue of reality—What is the *scope* of reality? What is real?—emerges as the crisis of this discussion. Right at the heart of the religious impulse there seems to be a certain solicitude for reality: the fear of foreclosing it or of reducing it to some merely human estimate. Many of us are still refusing to trust Caesar, in any of his modern incarnations, with the power to define reality. Many of us are still refusing to entrust that power to science. As inhabitants of the modern world, we are religious now perhaps to the extent of our desire to crack open the coffin of materialism, and to give to reality a larger, freer definition than is allowed by the

militant materialists of the corporate economy and their political servants, or by the mechanical paradigm of reductive science. Or perhaps I can make most plain what I'm trying to get at if I say that many of us are still withholding credence, just as properly and for the same reasons, from any person or institution claiming to have the definitive word on the purposes and the mind of God.

It seems to me that all the religions I know anything about emerge from an instinct to push against any merely human constraints on reality. In the Bible such constraints are conventionally attributed to "the world" in the pejorative sense of that term, which we may define as the world of the creation *reduced* by the purposes of any of the forms of selfishness. The contrary purpose, the purpose of freedom, is stated by Jesus in the fourth Gospel: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."

This astonishing statement can be thought about and understood endlessly, for it is endlessly meaningful, but I don't think it calls for much in the way of interpretation. It does call for a very strict and careful reading of the word *life*.

To talk about or to desire more abundance of anything has probably always been dangerous, but it seems particularly dangerous now. In an age of materialist science, economics, art and politics, we ought not to be much shocked by the appearance of materialist religion. We know we don't have to look far to find people who equate more abundant life with a bigger car, a bigger house, a bigger bank account and a bigger church. They are wrong, of course. If Jesus meant only that we should have more possessions or even more "life expectancy," then John 10:10 is no more remarkable than an advertisement for any commodity whatever. Abundance, in this verse, cannot refer to an abundance of material possessions, for life does not require a material abundance; it requires only a material sufficiency. That sufficiency granted, life itself, which is a membership in the living world, is already an abundance.

But even life in this generous sense of membership in creation does not protect us, as we know, from the dangers of avarice, of selfishness, of the wrong kind of abundance. Those dangers can be overcome only by the realization that in speaking of more abundant life, Jesus is not proposing to free *us* by making us richer; he is proposing to set life free from precisely that sort of error. He is talking about life, which is only incidentally our life, as a limitless reality.

Now that I have come out against materialism, I fear that I will be expected to say something in favor of spirituality. But if I am going to go on in the direction of what Jesus meant by “life” and “more abundantly,” then I have to avoid that duality of matter and spirit at all costs.

As every reader knows, the Gospels are overwhelmingly concerned with the conduct of human life, of life in the human commonwealth. In the Sermon on the Mount and in other places Jesus is asking his followers to see that the way to more abundant life is the way of love. We are to love one another, and this love is to be more comprehensive than our love for family and friends and tribe and nation. We are to love our neighbors though they may be strangers to us. We are to love our enemies. And this is to be a practical love; it is to be practiced, here and now. Love evidently is not just a feeling but is indistinguishable from the willingness to help, to be useful to one another. The way of love is indistinguishable, moreover, from the way of freedom. We don't need much imagination to imagine that to be free of hatred, of enmity, of the endless and hopeless effort to oppose violence with violence, would be to have life more abundantly. To be free of indifference would be to have life more abundantly. To be free of the insane rationalizations for our urge to kill one another—that surely would be to have life more abundantly.

And where more than in the Gospels' teaching about love do we see that famously estranged pair, matter and spirit, melt and flow together? There was a Samaritan who came upon one of his enemies, a Jew, lying wounded beside the road. And the Samaritan had compassion on the Jew and bound up his wounds and took care of him. Was this help spiritual or material? Was the Samaritan's compassion earthly or heavenly? If those questions confuse us, that is only because we have for so long allowed ourselves to believe, as if to divide reality impartially between science and religion, that material life and spiritual life, earthly life and heavenly life, are two different things.

To get unconfused, let us go to a further and even more interesting question about the parable of the Samaritan: Why? Why did the Samaritan reach out in love to his enemy, a Jew, who happened also to be his neighbor? Why was the unbounding of this love so important to Jesus?

We might reasonably answer, remembering Genesis 1:27, that all humans, friends and enemies alike, have the same dignity, deserve the same respect, and are worthy of the same compassion because they are, all alike, made in God's image.

That is enough of a mystery, and it implies enough obligation, to waylay us awhile. It is certainly something we need to bear anxiously in mind. But it is also too human-centered, too potentially egotistical, to leave alone.

I think Jesus recommended the Samaritan's loving-kindness, what certain older writers called "holy living," simply as a matter of propriety, for the Samaritan was living in what Jesus understood to be a holy world. The foreground of the Gospels is occupied by human beings and the issues of their connection to one another and to God. But there is a background, and the background more often than not is the world in the best sense of the word, the world as made, approved, loved, sustained and finally redeemable by God. Much of the action and the talk of the Gospels takes place outdoors: on mountainsides, lakeshores, riverbanks, in fields and pastures, places populated not only by humans but by animals and plants, both domestic and wild. And these nonhuman creatures, sheep and lilies and birds, are always represented as worthy of, or as flourishing within, the love and the care of God.

To know what to make of this, we need to look back to the Old Testament, to Genesis, to the Psalms, to the preoccupation with the relation of the Israelites to their land that runs through the whole lineage of the prophets. Through all this, much is implied or taken for granted. In only two places that I remember is the always implicit relation—the practical or working relation—of God to the creation plainly stated. Psalm 104:30, addressing God and speaking of the creatures, says, "Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created . . ." And, as if in response, Elihu says to Job (34:14-15) that if God "gather unto himself his spirit and his breath; All flesh shall perish together . . ." I have cut Elihu's sentence a little short so as to leave the emphasis on the phrase "all flesh."

Those also are verses that don't require interpretation, but I want to stretch them out in paraphrase just to make as plain as possible my reason for quoting them. They are saying that not just humans but *all* creatures live by participating in the life of God, by partaking of his Spirit and breathing his breath. And so the Samaritan reaches out in love to help his enemy, breaking all the customary boundaries, because he has clearly seen in his enemy not only a neighbor, not only a fellow human or a fellow creature, but a fellow sharer in the life of God.

When Jesus speaks of having life more abundantly, this, I think, is the life he means: a life that is not reducible by division, category or degree, but is one thing, heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material, divided only insofar as it is embodied in distinct

creatures. He is talking about a finite world that is infinitely holy, a world of time that is filled with life that is eternal. His offer of more abundant life, then, is not an invitation to declare ourselves as certified “Christians,” but rather to become conscious, consenting and responsible participants in the one great life, a fulfillment hardly institutional at all.

To be convinced of the sanctity of the world, and to be mindful of a human vocation to responsible membership in such a world, must always have been a burden. But it is a burden that falls with greatest weight on us humans of the industrial age who have been and are, by any measure, the humans most guilty of desecrating the world and of destroying creation. And we ought to be a little terrified to realize that, for the most part and at least for the time being, we are helplessly guilty. It seems as though industrial humanity has brought about phase two of original sin. We all are now complicit in the murder of creation. We certainly do know how to apply better measures to our conduct and our work. We know how to do far better than we are doing. But we don’t know how to extricate ourselves from our complicity very surely or very soon. How could we live without degrading our soils, slaughtering our forests, polluting our streams, poisoning the air and the rain? How could we live without the ozone hole and the hypoxic zones? How could we live without endangering species, including our own? How could we live without the war economy and the holocaust of the fossil fuels? To the offer of more abundant life, we have responded with choosing the economics of extinction.

If we take the Gospels seriously, we are left, in our dire predicament, facing an utterly humbling question: How must we live and work so as not to be estranged from God’s presence in his work and in all his creatures? The answer, we may say, is given in Jesus’ teaching about love. But that answer raises another question that plunges us into the abyss of our ignorance, which is both human and peculiarly modern: How are we to make of that love an economic practice?

That question calls for many answers, and we don’t know most of them. It is a question that those humans who want to answer it will be living and working with for a long time—if they are allowed a long time. Meanwhile, may heaven guard us from those who think they already have the answers.

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